Looking After Herself

‘There’s nothing that shakes my nerves like seeing a woman struggling and kicking in a policeman’s arms’, shudders Lord Borrodaile (Convert, p. 67). Robins was fascinated and also troubled by women’s supposed vulnerability and the restrictions this placed on their movements. Convert famously explores the brutality that women could experience in their campaigns for suffrage and considers some real-life methods of tackling violence. Robins’s writing is infused with illustrations of perilous everyday situations in which women could find themselves. The Sherlock Holmes stories present a multiplicity of scenarios in which Victorian men were required to defend themselves using physical force, a wide variety of everyday objects (such as the fire poker or the walking-stick) or a number of weapons of the time including the life-preserver (a cudgel which was weighted at one end). This chapter will show that what Doyle as a male writer did for the depiction of threat to men, Robins also achieved for danger to women.

Elizabeth Robins was born during the American Civil War and her early life and career was marked by bereavement and struggle. Her mother was committed to an asylum and in 1887 her actor-husband donned a suit of armour, not in preparation for a gallant role on stage, but to drown himself. Robins worked hard and by the late 1880s, she had made a name for herself on the American stage. In September 1888, she came to London merely on a passing visit from Norway, and met Oscar Wilde who gave her some encouragement. Robins was still unknown in Britain but she decided to stay, determined to achieve success and earn money to fund her mother’s release from a mental asylum and to pay for her younger brother’s education. Her first two
years in London, later described in her autobiography, *Both Sides of the Curtain* (1940), were spent in dingy lodgings. In *Daniel Deronda*, Herr Klesmer warns Gwendolen (before her marriage to Grandcourt) that if she took to the stage she could be subjected to ‘indignities’. A vague notion of these ‘alarm[s]’ her. Actresses were treated with a familiarity which angered Robins. She accused one stalker in her diary (which she kept from the age of thirteen until the end of her life): ‘Do you think because I am an actress you can get acquainted with me in this irregular fashion?’ As Angela V. John remarks, while restraint characterized the proper relation between the sexes, the actress, by virtue of her profession, inspired the illusion that she was also emotionally and physically available to the spectator. She was stalked, sent bunches of flowers, and in turn had to ward off fellow lodgers and watch out for men waiting in the dingy staircase near her bedroom.

Uncomfortable encounters whilst working and travelling furnished her with thrilling stories, too. *Under the Southern Cross* (1907) looks at the etiquette of dealing with marriage offers, but it is also a cautionary adventure. At the outset, the story is described as the narrator’s ‘little act of self-abasement for the instruction of [her] sex’ (*Southern Cross*, p. 2). Blanche, a 20-year-old headstrong American girl, accompanies her married friend on a South-American cruise and is wooed by a fiery Peruvian, Federico Guillermo de Bach. She dismisses his gauchely expressed semaphores and, despite observing an expression which was ‘dimly threatening in the deep eyes’ (*Southern Cross*, p. 181), follows him down a dark side street in Guatemala where, silencing her, he presses her to marry him (this action could be interpreted as an attempt to rape her). Robins reverts to the present tense to convey her heroine’s shock: ‘My puny resistance is nothing to those athlete’s arms, he holds me close one instant and I, breathless, struggle to free my hands, and push his hot cheek away from mine. “How dare you; you are no gentleman!”’ (*Southern Cross*, p. 208). He tells her that it is useless to resist as she cannot speak Spanish and any passersby who attempts to assist her will be faced with his gun. He adds that she does not need to fear him, a statement which, given the situation in which he has placed her, seems rather ironic. It also, however, gives her an indication of a point of weakness in his character in that he in his own way feels that he is protecting her. So, she cunningly extricates herself from the situation by appealing to his heated notion of chivalry, reminding him of his promise to return her to the ship: ‘If any other man had roughly treated me, had abused my confidence, and, finding me defenceless, had forgotten what all brave men owe to women what would you do to such a man? [...]